DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 115 116 FL 007 305

AUTHOR Babow, Irving
TITLE Neutering Employment Vocabulary: Planned Change in the Language of Sex Roles.
PUB DATE 3 May 75
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Pacific Regional Conference of the American Dialect Society (San Jose, California, May 3, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Employment Opportunities; *Employment Practices; Equal Opportunities (Jobs); *Language Planning; *Language Usage; *Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Socialization; Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics; *Vocabulary; Working Women

ABSTRACT

A significant linguistic shift in the United States is occurring in planned change in the language of sex roles, especially with reference to sexism in employment vocabulary and to gender-based distinctions in occupational designations. Social policy on labor utilization has become increasingly involved in neutering employment vocabulary regarding occupational titles, job classifications, recruitment, and upgrading. Relatively little attention has been given to sexist rhetoric related to work, career choice, opportunity structures, and occupational mobility. The rhetoric for maintaining women as an underclass and for preserving traditional values on sex roles in the labor market has played a powerful part in socialization of both females and males for "keeping women in their place." This socialization in microstructures and macrostructures has involved the use of language and ideology which, starting in early childhood, fosters female learned helplessness and provides many hidden dissuaders to discourage career aspirations, entering occupations, and achieving levels of employment not "traditional" for women. (Author)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED115116

NEUTERING EMPLOYMENT VOCABULARY

Planned Change in the Language of Sex Roles

Irving Babow

California Polytechnic State University

San Luis Obispo, California 93407

FL007305

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

A significant shift in the English language in the United States is occurring in planned change in the language of sex roles. This is especially the case with reference to sexism in employment vocabulary and to gender-based distinctions in occupational designations.

"Silly words and expressions have often disappeared not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority," George Orwell wrote in 1946 in Politics and the English Language. Orwell's observation can be applied now to the deliberate linguistic change in sex-role definitions in employment. As Wilma Scott Heide of NOW, the National Organization for Women, pointed out: "In any social movement, when changes are effected, the language sooner or later reflects the change. Our approach is different. Instead of passively noting the change, we are changing language patterns to actively effect the changes, a significant part of which is the conceptual tool of thought, our language."

In addition to the women's movement with its consciousness-raising and legislative efforts and its advocates in various professional and academic associations and institutions, other major change agents are government policies for equal employment opportunity and affirmative action for women and required modification of occupational titles and job descriptions; and deliberate efforts by writers, educators, vocational guidance and

personnel counselors, social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, social scientists, foundations, publishers, media representatives and others to restructure verbal and nonverbal communication regarding sex-role expectations and definitions in work and other arenas. Sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics are also devoting increasing attention to this subject.

Social policy on labor utilization in the United States has become increasingly involved in neutering employment vocabulary regarding occupational titles, job classifications, recruitment and upgrading. Relatively little attention has been given, however, in policy-making and enforcement and in social research to sexist rhetoric related to work, career choice, opportunity structures and occupational mobility. This rhetoric for maintaining women as an underclass and for preserving traditional values on sex roles in the labor market has played a powerful part in socialization of both females and males for "keeping women in their place." This socialization in microstructures and macrostructures of American society has involved, and often still does, the use of language and ideology which, starting in early childhood, fosters female learned helplessness and provides many hidden dissuaders to discourage career aspirations and deter entering occupations and achieving levels of employment not "traditional" for women.

A commonplace example of sexist everyday speech is the notion of the "castrating female," which was refuted thus by Jessie Bernard: "The castrating female...is interested in her work, she is excited by it, she is dedicated to it, as a man might be...She has no envy of (men) or hostility toward them...

Her castrating effect...is not (due to) anything she does but (to) something she does not do, that is...taking a subservient position."

The deference demeanor, verbal and nonverbal, which is frequently expected of women at work may extend to forms of address, not being listened to seriously or having their ideas or specific accomplishment taken over without recognition, and being excluded from the "old-boy" network of informal communication which may deal with career opportunities and "learning the ropes." Instead of using a neutral vocabulary and perspectives related to performance criteria for a specific job or occupation, the rhetoric of gender-based distinctions relies on a collection of stereotyped fictions which may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A recent study by Rosalind Loring and Theodora Wells of factors involved in upgrading women into management positions in business, industry, government, health and education gave considerable attention to the language and rhetoric of sexism used by gatekeepers in management to screen out women and justify their exclusion from management positions. An illustration these writers use is the old compliment, "She thinks like a man" given to women so exceptional they can only be complimented in male terms. The implication is that to be like a man is good, whereas to be like a woman is not. Whether the speaker in management is a man or a woman, Loring and Wells reported that most traditional attitudes by individuals in management define women in terms of

and in relation to men. Women are said to be "valued for those qualities of kindness and tolerance, spirituality, or humanness which are not part of the expectations of what a 'real' man is." Men, on the other hand, are "supposed to be tough, concerned for the dollar, practical and objective enough to face the facts and act accordingly," competitive and strong enough to do what has to be done even if someone gets hurt in the process. These assumptions are supposed to be true respectively for all men and all women so that any noticeable variance from the standard for a "real" man or a "real" woman makes that person vulnerable because he or she is different. Another assumption is "that men and women are totally different and there is no commonality in the characteristics attributed to each sex." According to Loring and Wells, aggressiveness is socially valued when shown by men but denigrated when demonstrated by women; and both men and women were found to define a women as "unfeminine" if she displays certain aggressive behavior.

A common hidden dissuader in the world of work is the assumption, prevalent in other spheres as well, that "women just aren't as smart as men"--in administration, problem-solving, abstract thinking, scientific and technical skills, mathematical reasoning, and any other areas in which a pretext for excluding or downgrading women is desired.

This assumption about employed women as "dumb" and incompetent is expressed not only in rationales for discrimination in upgraded occupations and professions but even in a vocabulary of condescension and ridicule toward women in fields which are traditionally "women's work," such as clerical employment. According to the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, more than one-third of the nearly 35 million women in the labor force in 1972 were clerical workers, including more than 4 million stenographers, typists and secretaries. An example of the sexist employment vocabulary and perspective against women who are clerical workers, and against women in general, was displayed in an advertisement in Publishers Weekly, August 6, 1973. The ad was for a nonfiction book by Melvin Grayson entitled, Executive Sweeties, presumably a pun on the popular novel and motion picture, Executive Suite. The ad stated that it is not true Grayson puts the knock on all 4,000,000 secretaries in the United States: "...many of them, perhaps as many as 150, are quite good."

The book was described as an "hilarious study of secretarial incompetence in general with illustrative case histories of 13 'Sweeties' who drove the author up his office wall." According to this ad, "A good businessman, Grayson insists, should trust his secretary to arrange four chairs and a card table. (He'd better not trust her to fix his morning coffee, either, if she gets her hands on this book.)"

An ironical aspect about this advertisement for a dehumanizing piece of kitsch at $5.95 per copy (and on a theme common in popular culture) is that it appeared in a prestigious publication like Publishers Weekly, which has given considerable favorable attention to progress against sexism and racism in employment in publishing firms and in books published in the United States.

A notable example of publishers' efforts against sexism in books and one which received much discussion, usually favorable, in the press in 1974 was the 11-page "Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications." Gender distinctions in employment vocabulary received much attention, and a large proportion of the content has some bearing on language change and invention such as word-coining to break down sexist stereotypes. Following are some excerpts:

> Though many women will continue to choose traditional occupations such as homemaker or secretary, women should not be type-cast in these roles but shown in a wide variety of professions and trades....
>
> An attempt should be made to break job stereotypes for both women and men. No job should be considered sex-typed, and it should never be implied that certain jobs are incompatible with a woman's "femininity" or a man's "masculinity."....

> Women within a profession should be shown at all professional levels, including the top levels. Women should be portrayed in positions of authority over men and over other women....women and men should be offered more options than were available to them when work was stereotyped by sex....
>
> According to Labor Department statistics for 1972, over 42 percent of all mothers with children under 18 worked outside the home, and about a third of these working mothers had children under six. Publications ought to reflect this reality....
>
> Like men and boys, women and girls should be portrayed as independent, active, strong, courageous, competent, decisive, persistent, serious-minded and successful. They should appear as logical thinkers, problem-solvers and decision makers. They should be shown as interested in their work, pursuing a variety of career goals, and both deserving of and receiving public recognition for their accomplishments.

The McGraw-Hill Guidelines also include recommended language usage regarding gender distinctions in employment vocabulary. The suggestions reveal how effectively the

Guidelines fulfill their aims: to show the role language has played in reinforcing inequality based arbitrarily on gender differences and to indicate specific components of the process for language change to deal with this situation.

For example, instead of using lady as a modifier, as in lady lawyer, it is recommended that a woman who is a lawyer is identified through the choice of pronouns (The lawyer made her summation to the jury) and that gender modifiers should be avoided, or if necessary, woman or female should be used, as in: a course on women writers, or the airline's first female pilot. Instead of female-gender word forms such as authoress or poetess, say author or poet. Instead of speaking of career girl or career woman, name the woman's profession: attorney Ellen Smith; Marie Sanchez, a journalist or editor or business executive or doctor or lawyer. The Guidelines give particular attention to man-words:

> The word man has long been used not only to denote a person of male gender, but also generically to denote humanity at large. To many people today, however, the word man has become so closely associated with the first meaning (a male human being) that they consider it no longer broad enough to be applied to any person or to human beings as a whole. In deference to this position, alternative expressions can be made without producing an awkward or artificial construction.

An illustration of a possible substitute for man-words in the work setting was given: instead of "the best man for the job," say "the best person (or candidate) for the job." The guidelines point out that, "the English language lacks a generic singular pronoun signifying he or she, and therefore it has been customary and grammatically sanctioned to use masculine pronouns in expressions such as, 'one....he,' 'anyone....he,' and 'each child opens his book.'" It is recommended that when possible the pronouns he, him and his be avoided in reference to the hypothetical person, and various alternatives are offered for consideration: reword to eliminate unnecessary gender pronouns. Replace the masculine pronoun with one, you, he or she, or her or his as appropriate. Alternate male and female expressions and examples.

For occupational terms ending in man, the guidelines suggest that they, "should be replaced whenever possible by terms that can include members of either sex unless they refer to a particular person." For instance, instead of Congressman, say: member of Congress; representative, but Congressman Koch and Congresswoman Holzman. Other illustrations were: supervisor, not foreman; business executive or business manager, not businessman; fire fighter, not fireman; camera operator, not cameraman. It was recommended that different nomenclature should not be used for the same job depending upon whether it is held by a male or by a female.

The term, flight attendant was suggested instead of steward or stewardess, and police officer instead of policeman and policewoman. It was also suggested that, "different pronouns should not be linked with certain work or occupations on the assumption that the worker is always (or usually) female or male." Instead, either pluralize, or use he or she and she or he. For example, say, "secretaries....they," not, "the secretary....she." Instead of, "the breadwinner....his earnings," preferred terms are, "the breadwinner....his or her earnings," or, "breadwinners....their earnings."

One of the most massive and comprehensive projects in the United States for planned change in employment vocabulary with respect to gender-based distinctions in occupational titles and classifications is in revising the current Third Edition of 1965, of the Dictionary of Occupational Titles, which lists almost 22,000 titles. Many of these are being revised by the U.S. Department of Labor for the forthcoming Fourth Edition of 1976. The Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor has stimulated and cooperated in this effort for revision, and similar developments have occurred in the Bureau of the Census in occupational designations and classifications.

Several publishers of dictionaries have already made or are making revisions in new editions to change sexist and gender-differentiating language for listings and definitions in occupations and professions. An example of the need for change can be seen from this usage and definition of the word journeyman

in a dictionary: "noun, plural, -men. A qualified workman who has completed his apprenticeship, but has not become an employer or master workman."

Some arguments made by critics of these efforts at planned change in the language of sex roles in employment may be summed up thus:

1. Tinkering with language. This is an artificial, arbitrary and unwarranted effort to transform the language by invention and word-coinage instead of a gradual evolutionary process. This attempt makes prescriptions and restrictions on the use of language and sanitizes it. The proposed changes lack style, reduce the vigor of our language, and the results are often comic in the ridiculous sense.

2. Tinkering with sex roles.

a. "Anti" the women's movement and opposed to equality of women: This whole movement is absurd, and so is the endeavor to change our language. Shades of Freud: My God, what do women want?

b. Men are the primary workers, and women are the secondary workers. That's what some economists say. So why fool around with the language, especially now in a recession. Why should women work, anyhow, when men need jobs?

c. Equality of women is a great ideal, but.... Trying to change our language is a futile attempt to change reality. This effort trivializes the issue of female equality and is nit-picking. It's the wrong way to go about it.

d. You can't eat honorific titles, and there's no power in psychic income. In a critical appraisal of the

Women's Liberation Movement in 1973, the sociologist, Amitai Etzioni, attributed to it a preoccupation with mannerisms, titles, and symbolic issues and said that apparently the more the movement is frustrated in changing the socio-economic-legal structure, the more it concerns itself with images. He believes that while the right imagery will help women achieve their due share and status, one of the best ways to correct images is to correct the reality: "No one calls the boss 'boy' (or 'girl'), and if they do, it matters little. A woman senator, mayor, or bureau chief will not be sent to the end of the table to talk of babies and cooking." The Women's Liberation Movement, according to Etzioni, is excessively entangled in image politics, and "too often seems to confuse token achievements with major breakthroughs, gestures with societal changes, and changes in titles with changes in entitlement."

From the perspectives of humanistic sociolinguistics, the concern of the women's movement with image-changing and the language of sexism has greater implications for planned social change than sociologists like Etzioni seem to recognize. This especially is the case regarding sex roles in employment and in employment vocabulary.

Thomas Luckmann, in his study, The Sociology of Language, pointed out that very little is known at present about the relationships among occupational structures, economic role systems, and linguistic repertories or styles ("jargons"). It

would seem that just as little, or perhaps even less, is known about sex role differentiation in these matters and what part gender-based distinctions play in putting women at a disadvantage in access to information about the system and its values.

Agents of socialization still to a considerable degree give currency and legitimacy to theories of neutralization for sanctioning the treatment of women as an underclass. Even when gains seem evident, there may be a culture lag, a residue of sexist orientation. For example, five days a week millions of women watch a television soap opera, "The Doctors," on NBC. Several of the main characters are physicians who are women, including an administrator, and usually the nurses in the program are women. When the narrator opens and closes the program, he says in a sanctimonious tone that the program is, "dedicated to the brotherhood of healing." Nobody connected with the program seems to recognize that it might just as accurately and fairly be dedicated to the sisterhood of healing.

In considering sex roles and employment vocabulary, attention needs to be given to the vocabulary of discomfort, the use of verbal and nonverbal communication to maintain dominance, to deter members of a subordinate group from entering or remaining in territory from which they were previously excluded. Language, tone, gestures and facial expression here are the means for lowering self-esteem through repeated put-down, ridicule and disdain; making people feel uncomfortable

as outsiders or intruders; treating them as non-persons and paying little or no attention when they speak or make suggestions. Nietzsche used the term, "the frog mentality," to describe how the overclass refers to the underclass as if its members are subhuman, like frogs, and underclass members are expected to and often accept this devalued definition of themselves.

Women are often exposed to the vocabulary of discomfort in employment, especially when they try to enter fields or levels of employment which were previously closed to them, or they were dissuaded from entering. The women's movement has been a powerful force for helping women define their own identity and achieve status and solidarity.

In March, 1975, Supreme Court Justice Brannan, speaking for the Court in declaring unconstitutional an amendment to the Social Security Act, said, "The gender-based distinction (in the Social Security Act) is entirely irrational."

In the world of work and in a large part of the employment vocabulary and the rhetoric for differential rules, criteria and rewards in employment for men and women, there seems good reason to conclude that here also the gender-based distinction is entirely irrational. Well, maybe not entirely irrational when you come across a cartoon like the one by Henry Martin in the Saturday Review (January 11, 1975). A woman is standing beside the bed of her sleeping husband, and she tells him, "Get up, Harry, or you'll be late for work, and a liberated woman will get your job."